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To the Fountain Fly

Dealy kept an eye on the snake as she fed Frank's pant leg under the sewing machine needle. Its long, leathery body hung over the cracked closet door, almost never moving, just a quiver every now and then so she knew it was there and was alive. Her sweaty hands shook a little as she gathered the pants' rip in front of the needle and goosed the machine's pedal like she was backing the truck out of a tight spot. Doing it this way made less noise than a continuous run and too much racket might cause the snake to drop to the floor, maybe out of sight. The living room's one lamp was on and pulled near the sewing machine, its 40 watt bulb casting back the darkness that pooled in the corners of the room and flooded the hallway. It gave just enough light to let her see her work, and to see that the snake was still over the door. Not enough to know if a bite from it would cause her a painful death or just pain, though. Was its body solid black or patterned? Was its head rounded or triangular? She couldn't tell and she wouldn't get closer to see.

"God help me, God help me, God help me," she whispered in time to the sewing machine's scissory chomp. The sound held back the silence the way the lamp held back the dark. It had been black night for hours and was surely after midnight by now. Usually Dealy wouldn't wait up for Frank like this, wouldn't strain her eyes and waste electricity on something she could easily do by the light of day. But after her youngest boy Pete, the only one of her eight children who still lived at home, had gone to bed, she'd sat down to sew up a tear in the dress she wanted to wear to church in the morning. That's when she'd seen the snake. If she called to Pete, he'd

come stumbling down the hall past the snake-draped closet door and end up getting bit. The best thing to do was sit here and wait for Frank.

Finally, just as Dealy cut Frank's pants loose from the machine, their blue permanently dingy from ground-in coal dust, she heard Frank's too-loud voice ring out between the hills and down to their house by the creek. Drunk, like most Saturday nights. But he'd be here in just minutes and then the snake's head would be crushed.

"All I need to make me happy is two little boys to call me Pappy," he sang as his boots thudded onto the porch. "One named John, the other Davey. One asylum, the other crazy." His steps were heavy and drink-clumsy, sending vibrations into the floorboards of the house and maybe up the closet door. Dealy's eyes darted to the snake. A slight quiver, but it didn't descend.

"Wake up and piss, Dealy, the world's on fire," Frank said as he let the front door bang open. A cool breeze raised chills on Dealy's arms. The past few days had been warm enough to bring the dogwoods into bloom, but the nights still felt like March instead of April.

"I am awake, you fool. Keep it down, we've got trouble." She rose from her seat for the first time in hours, her back and legs stiff from stillness and fear. She pointed to the closet door. "Snake."

His swimmy eyes looked to her finger and followed its trail to the ropy body hanging in the shadows. He squinted, tottered, and moved slowly toward it.

"Careful, Frank!" Dealy said, louder than she meant to. She put a hand over her mouth and held her elbow with her other hand. All they needed was Pete running in here.

"Lord, lord, Dealy." Frank was only a couple feet or so from the closet door now. If the snake rose up, it could strike him. "This sure is a fine mess."

“I know it, Frank, I know it. I been sitting here for hours, was afraid to take my eyes off it.” She crossed her arms in front of herself and hugged them. Frank took another small step toward the snake. He was still smiling a little, like he was about to break into another one of his mean songs. Dealy wondered if he was sober enough to even know what he was doing. “Let me get your gun for you,” she said. “Or the hoe. It’s just out back.”

“Aw, no, honey. A snake comes in my house, I’m gonna take care of it with my own hands.” And in one quick motion, he snatched the snake right behind its head. Dealy’s breath caught in her throat and she seized her arms tighter. Frank spun then, and the snake was on her. Dealy screamed and fell back into her seat, flinging her arms and kicking at the skinny strip of brown. Her heart beat so hard it felt like it would run itself out and her stomach shrunk down, curling her up and pulling her back in the chair as far as she could get. Pete was in the room then, and Frank was laughing so hard he had to grab his son’s shoulder to keep standing.

“What is it, Dad?” Pete said. “Mommy sick?”

Frank was still laughing and had to suck in a few big breaths before he could talk. “No, Pete, she ain’t sick.” He sounded like he’d just run a mile. Dealy looked up at him and wished, even though it was a sin, that he’d drop dead where he stood. “She just can’t tell the difference between a snake and a belt, that’s all.” And then he was laughing again, sinking onto the floor with great body-shaking fits of it.

Dealy put her hands to her face and wished one of her daughters was here. If Frank had done such a thing when Martha was at home, she’d have given her daddy an earful. Ever since she got married in January and moved out, though, Dealy couldn’t defend herself against the meanness Frank always claimed was just teasing. At one time, she’d have known Pete would be on her side since he used to cry when his daddy played jokes on him, but now she wasn’t so sure.

Ever since Thelma Goins from the company store came down one day last week to tell Dealy what Frank had done, she hadn't been able to quite trust the boy.

"Hollered out real loud for me to put that one roll of toilet paper on his tab because you was on your way to the outhouse when he left," Thelma had said. "The store was about half full, Dealy, and just about everybody took to laughing. Except me, of course." Thelma's voice dropped a little too much for Dealy to believe she hadn't laughed, but just as she was about to tell her she didn't need a report on her husband's meanness, she heard Pete laughing. She peered out the screen door and there he was, doubled over on the back stoop.

"Pete!" Dealy said. He froze and looked up at her, still smiling but not laughing. She looked back at Thelma, who made no move to leave. Whatever Dealy did or didn't do would be reported back to everyone at the store, who would then spread it to everyone else. She turned back to Pete. "Go cut yourself a switch and get back here."

Dealy hadn't switched him since he was little, and at first he didn't seem to understand what she was telling him, but when she yelled "Go!", he went. In a few minutes he came back with a budding switch from the apple tree and she nearly took it to his head for the waste of fall fruit. At the time Dealy thought he'd taken it without thinking, but now when she raised her head from her hands and saw the corners of his mouth beginning to twitch, she realized he'd known exactly what he was doing. In just a minute, he'd be laughing along with his daddy. She got up and took careful, shaky steps around the belt, its splayed shape no longer threatening, but still cruel.

"Pete, get back to bed," she told him. She was still a few inches taller than him, despite last month's three-inch growth spurt. "It's late and your daddy ain't in no shape to be seen." Pete just stood there. His face was wrinkled with pillow creases that made him look older than

thirteen, like a shorter version of Frank. His mouth twitched again and Dealy could tell he was chomping on the insides of his cheeks. “Go on, go on, go on!” She flapped her hands at him like she was shooing chickens. Pete still stood there.

“Go on, Pete,” Frank said through his tapering laughter. “Before your momma takes both our heads off.”

Pete turned then and went back down the hall, turning once to give a half-smile back at his daddy before shutting his door. Dealy raised her glasses and rubbed the red dents they made on her nose. Frank let himself slide into a sprawl. His legs splayed out and his breath got heavier, close to a snore. She could easily lug him to bed, like she did many other Saturday nights, especially since her muscles were still surging with the strength her fright had pumped into them. She wasn’t going to, though. He could sleep out here on the cold floor with no blanket or pillow.

The belt still lay in the middle of the living room floor and instead of skirting it this time, Dealy went right up to it and threw it out the still-open front door. It turned and twisted off the steps and lost its form in the darkness. She started to close the door softly, turning the knob so it wouldn’t make a noise in the latch, but just as she did so, a loud snore ripped out of Frank and set Dealy’s heart to running again. His eyes were closed and his mouth was open, so she didn’t think he had scared her on purpose, but still, her re-stiffened back made her think better of what she’d just done. With the front door open just a crack, maybe a real snake would find its way to the warm body slumped on the floor.

In the morning, as the gravy thickened on the stovetop and the biscuits browned in the oven, Dealy went over to the drooling heap of Frank and kicked at his thigh until his eyes popped open, red-veined and heavy-lidded. He was hurting, but not from a snake or any other

critter. “Get yourself to bed,” she said in a loud voice meant to stab at any headache he might have. His eyes rolled up to her, but he didn’t move. “Pete’ll be up any minute.” She kicked at his thigh again.

“I’m going, I’m going.” He propped himself to his knees and staggered up. There was no trace of a smile on his face now and this made Dealy want to smile, but she didn’t. A sour wind came off him as he passed by her on his way to their bedroom. After she heard him shut the door, she reached and turned the knob of the front door, easing it closed with an almost-silent clunk. The Lord had saved her from herself, she realized. If any harm had come to Frank during the night, she would’ve been hell-bound for certain. Still, He couldn’t fault her for wanting harm to come right during the heat of things, when Frank was so mean and she was so hurt and afraid.

“Pete!” she called down the hall. “Breakfast!”

Dealy was pouring the gravy into a bowl when Pete finally came scuffling in the kitchen. Usually he didn’t have to be told to get up and get dressed, but usually Frank didn’t cause such a scene in the middle of the night. This morning Pete was still in his pajamas and Sunday school started in just half an hour. Dealy had dressed right after she got up and had even had a few spare minutes to admire the almost-invisible mend she’d made in her dress last night. It was covered by her apron now, but when she ran her hand over her thigh, she could feel the thin seam she’d made with careful, tiny stitches. She’d even used two colors of thread, blue and white, to match the blue and white checked pattern in the material. Her work would be unnoticeable to anyone who didn’t know it was there, but she almost wanted people to notice it so they could see how nice it was.

“Why ain’t you dressed yet?” she asked Pete. He looked everywhere but her eyes—the gravy pan in her hand, the empty plates on the chrome-rimmed table, the little crack between

cabinet and linoleum where at least a dozen marbles had disappeared over the years. Finally he fastened his stare on the window to the side of where they were standing and shrugged.

“I don’t want to go to church,” he said. “Daddy ain’t going.”

“Your Daddy ain’t going because he ain’t fit to go.” Her fingers were still playing over the seam beneath her apron, but at the thought of Frank, her stitching began to feel long, skinny, and snake-like. She dusted at it through her apron like she was brushing flour away and took up her wooden spoon to glop the last of the gravy into its bowl. “You’re fit.”

Pete shrugged again and let his eyes drop from the window to his bare feet. “I don’t want to, though.”

Want in one hand and shit in the other, see which one fills up faster, Frank’s voice said in Dealy’s mind before she could shut it out. She turned from her son and dropped the empty gravy pan from a height that made it clatter around in the sink before settling. She especially needed church this morning if Frank’s wickedness was taking over her own thoughts. And Pete needed it, too. He needed to be around men who cared if they were right with God, who could show him the right way to be.

“Wanting don’t have nothing to do with it.” Dealy rested a hand on the edge of the sink and ran water over the pan. “It’s what God wants that matters and God wants you to go to church, so that’s what you’re going to do. Besides, there’s a foot washing this morning and I think we both need a good cleansing. So get dressed.”

On the walk to church, Dealy felt her soul begin to lighten. The redbuds were joining the white and pink dogwoods in splashing new, clean color on the gray mountainside that rose up at the edge of town. She kept her eyes lifted to them as she walked, feeling the way she sometimes

did when she got the spirit in church and just had to shout out her joy. Pete was following at a dragging distance, though, and she was a little glad he was pouting because he kept her soul from flying too high. It wasn't trees and flowers that should be sending her into such bliss, after all. He kicked at rocks with each step and kept his hands stuffed deep in the pockets of his Sunday trousers. She stopped just past the railroad tracks, careful to cross on the wooden ties and not let her white patent leather shoes slip into the black cinders.

"C'mon, Pete," she called. He kept his eyes on his brown loafers, which were getting scuffed from all his kicking. She would yell at him for it, but he was going to have to have new ones anyway since his feet had shot out when his height shot up. "We'll be late yet."

"I said I didn't want to go."

"And I said wanting don't have nothing to do with it. Now hurry."

"But ain't you supposed to want to?"

"Of course you're supposed to want to." He caught up to her and she thumbed his chin upward to make him look at her. His brothers had given her no end of trouble in church and had quit going long before they were thirteen, but it wasn't like him to worry her about going. Not too long ago, he had liked singing hymns and saying the meal prayers so much his brothers had started calling him Preacher. Dealy had yelled at them every time they did it, saying it was almost as bad as taking the Lord's name in vain, but secretly she hoped he would get the call to be a preacher. Now, though, there was a hint of meanness in how his eyes settled on her nose. "If you'd just ask God to open your heart and mind to Him," she said, "you would want to."

She let go of his chin and he kicked another rock. It bounced a few feet ahead of them. One more kick took it almost to the churchyard, where several of Pete's cousins and two of his little nephews were standing around in stiff Sunday clothes they were forbidden to run in. Dealy

let Pete go to them while she went inside to say hello to some of her sisters, daughters, and neighbors. She and Martha had decided to plant a garden together this year, and as they talked about when Frank should till and what signs were best for planting greens and potatoes, Dealy's fingers kept being drawn to the mend in her dress. She felt along its length and width, the stitches a small ridge in the flat plain of the fabric. If Martha knew what her daddy had done with that belt last night, she thought, she'd have a fit. Dealy didn't want to spoil church by bringing up that mess, though, and there'd be plenty of time to tell Martha and the other girls what happened when they came over for Sunday dinner.

"Dark moon or growing moon, Mommy, you listening?" Martha asked.

"Dark moon." Dealy said. "That'll make more taters than tops, growing moon'll make more tops than taters."

The bell rang to assemble everyone and Dealy was relieved to see Pete trudge in and find his place next to her. She'd worried she would have to go out and drag him in. He was silent during the service, though, not even joining in on "This Little Light of Mine," which he used to love. And once during prayer, when so many around them were getting so loud with the spirit, Dealy cracked an eye and saw that Pete was just staring straight ahead, without even bowing his head. His eyes looked empty and Dealy had a vision of a claw around his heart, snatching it away. Brother Roy gave a good sermon about the prodigal son, though, and since Pete couldn't help but hear it, Dealy hoped it went past his ears and into his heart.

After the offering, it was time for the foot washing and Dealy had to pull at Pete's arm to get him to join her in line in the aisle. There was a good-sized crowd gathered today, more than during the cold months, when people would rather stay in their beds than come be warmed by the Word. Sister Betty played the piano while everyone waited their turn, and seemed to get through

about half the hymnal before Dealy got in sight of the bench in front of the altar. Dealy didn't mind, though, because the longer she waited the better she felt. Her soul was about to be washed clean, almost like a new baptism, and she would slide off that bench a new person.

"Rock of ages, cleft for me, Let me hide myself in Thee," the congregation sang as old Emmett took his place on the bench in front of Dealy. He slipped off his shoes and she looked down at her own white flats as Brother Dick washed Emmett's feet in a metal bowl and Brother Roy said some words over him. She couldn't help looking up at Emmett's face as he rose from the bench, though, to witness the smile that grew from his soul outward. It was the same smile she would be wearing in just moments.

"Foul, I to the fountain fly," Dealy sang while Emmett took his shoes and moved to a side aisle. "Wash me, Savior, or I die." She stopped singing when she stepped up to the bench. Her soul was already soaring, but when she slipped off her shoes, her ready smile drew back in horror. Her bare feet were completely black. Her hand searched out the bench behind her, but she didn't sit. Brother Dick reached out his hand.

"Sister Dealy?" His hand wavered in midair as she shrank from it. Her head shook without her wanting it to and she felt sick and faint, but she couldn't faint here and have everybody see what Brother Dick and Brother Roy had just seen. And Pete. She turned, but Pete was no longer behind her in line. At least half a dozen other people were, though, and were close enough to see. They all stopped singing and seemed to recede from her without moving their legs.

"Mommy?" Martha moved toward her, but Dealy slipped her shoes back on and hurried past Old Emmett in the side aisle before her daughter could reach her.

The churchyard was deserted. Dealy didn't know if Pete had gone home or to the outhouse or off to some mischief with his cousins, but she couldn't stay here to find out. She ran across the railroad tracks, down the dirt road between hills, and when she got to her yard, she picked up Frank's dew-damp belt and flung it into the creek. In the house, Frank was in the kitchen eating cold biscuits and drinking coffee.

"Why'd you do it?" She heard herself out of breath and felt like she'd just returned to her body after some time away.

"Do what?" His mouth was half-full. He glanced up at her as he chewed. Dealy slipped off her shoes and threw them both at him. One bounced off his shoulder and the other knocked his coffee off the table. He kept looking at the place where his cup had been, like he couldn't understand how it had disappeared.

"Somebody," Dealy said. "You. You put coal dust in the toes of my shoes, knowing there was a foot washing this morning."

Frank looked up at her and then down at her feet. One of his cheeks was still full of biscuit, so when he started laughing, he choked on it a little. He laughed louder and longer than he had last night, even though he wasn't drunk. Tears rolled down his cheeks and he pounded the table a couple times before he started to quiet down. Dealy's feet felt heavy, like the black grime smeared across them had turned to iron. She wanted to run, to flee Frank and this house and everyone she knew, but there was nowhere to go.

"Lord, Dealy," he said, finally swallowing the last of the biscuit. "It wasn't me, I didn't even know there was a foot washing. That's a good one, though, whoever it was."

"It had to be you, Frank, who else could do such a meanness?"

Frank shrugged and suddenly Dealy knew. "Pete," she said. "Did he come home?"

“Haven’t seen him since he left with you. But listen to yourself, Dealy. If Ira or James had been here, I wouldn’t argue it was one of them, but Pete don’t have that kind of thing in him.” He glanced at her feet again and clamped his lips to hide little rippling laughs. Dealy snatched her shoes from either side of his chair and put them back on her feet.

“It was him, Frank, I know it. He’s been acting different. And he went off and hid before it all happened. It was him, sure as the world, and you’re gonna have to find him and set him right.”

“Aw, Dealy, now don’t be that way. Even if it was him, he was just playing a little joke. Hell, I hope it was him. Shows the boy’s got some spunk.”

“Frank, do you know how bad he made me look in front of the preacher? In front of everybody? Do you know how bad he made me feel? And in church, of all places?”

“Church, church, church.” He pounded a fist on the table again, but he wasn’t laughing now. “Ain’t cleaning dirty feet what a foot washing’s for, Dealy? I bet if Jesus walked in here right now, you’d say ‘Why don’t you shave, you old beardy devil?’” He scooted his chair back and knocked her shoulder a little as he went past. “I’ve heard all I’m gonna listen to about church.”

Dealy wobbled and reached out for the back of a chair. Frank was on the front porch now and Dealy strained to hear the sound of his laughter, to know the thing he’d said was just another one of his mean teases, but it didn’t come. He leaned back inside to tell her to save some dinner for him and then pulled the front door so hard it banged behind him. She hurried after him.

“You going to look for Pete?” she yelled to his back. He didn’t turn or stop, just waved a hand behind him like he was shushing her. Usually he only drank on Saturday nights, but today

she didn't know what he might do. He was still in the rumpled clothes he'd slept in last night and hadn't even combed his hair.

Dealy went back inside and stared at the closed door. The house was quieter than it ever had been and it seemed like she could hear the quaking inside herself. It wasn't like when the fire was out in the morning and the cold air shook her from skin to bones, but like some kind of belly fire had been doused and shook her from the inside out. She had done nothing wrong, though, and had nothing to feel guilty for.

"Mommy, you here?" her daughter Eva called from outside. "You okay?"

Dealy leaned to the side of the front door and peered out the window. Eva, Martha, and Ruth were in the yard, still in their church clothes and a couple hours early for dinner. Dealy lifted her heavy feet and hurried to the bathroom before they came in.

"You in here Mommy?" Martha called from the living room.

"I'm here," Dealy answered. She tried to sound cheerful, but her voice came out too high and warbly, almost like she was singing.

"You okay?" Eva asked.

"I'm fine." Her washcloth had already gone black and her feet were still covered with soot. "I'll be out shortly, just make yourselves comfortable."

She heard murmuring and then the clicky steps of their Sunday shoes as they moved into the kitchen. Her hands were shaking and the sickly faintness she'd felt in church hadn't really gone away, but still she scrubbed and scrubbed until redness overtook the black and her feet were clean.

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It was almost dark when Frank came back with Pete in tow. Just an hour ago the house had been full with Dealy's daughters, three sons, and assorted husbands, wives, and kids, and for a while it had seemed like any other Sunday. Dealy had talked and served food and hugged the kids, and heard little about the absence of Frank and Pete. Early on, James had asked where Daddy and Preacher were, and after Dealy gave Martha the nod, her daughter took on the job of whispering to the adults what had happened. Dealy was happy to heap food on people's plates and smile like nothing was unusual, but now everyone was gone and here was Frank and Pete coming in the front door and nothing was the same at all.

"Down in the bushes below the trestle," Frank said before Dealy could ask. He had his hand on Pete's shoulder, not gripping it, just laying it there. Pete's Sunday clothes were covered in burrs.

"Why'd you do it?" she asked. Pete kept his head down. He hadn't looked at his mother once since he came in. "Why'd you do it, Pete?"

He still didn't look up or answer, so Frank nudged his shoulder. "Answer your mother, boy."

Pete tossed his head and then looked up, but not at Dealy. "I just don't want to go anymore. That's all. I said I didn't want to go."

Dealy looked down at her feet and took a step back from him. "And because you don't want to go, you think it's right to shame me out of going?"

Pete didn't answer.

"Ain't nothing gonna keep you from going but pride, Dealy, and you know it," Frank said. He let go of Pete's shoulder, but Pete didn't run off. "You still want me to set him right?"

Dealy looked up. Her fingers played over the mend in her dress. Pete's eyes met hers now, but she couldn't find the boy she thought she knew in them. They were hard and distant, like the eyes of a much older man she'd never met before. Dealy nodded to Frank.

"All right. But I'm doing it right here." He sighed as he took off his belt and told Pete to bend over. The licks came fast and hard, but Pete didn't cry out, just made little grunts. Dealy flinched with each hit. They lashed at a place deep inside her, beyond where blood had the power to heal.